

Lord Of The Lost look to cover themselves in glory



# LORD OF THE LOST

*Weapons Of Mass Seduction*

NAPALM

Industrial goth mischief-makers toy with the classics on their covers album

**GERMANY'S LORD OF** The Lost lived up to their name at Eurovision 2023, limping home in last place. And that's fine. The five-piece thrust their sparkling gimp-sticks into millions of homes, driving curious ears toward eight records packed with gothic industrial, symphonia and lovelorn litanies. Never to waste an opportunity, they've since

**"THEY LINGER IN THEIR COMFORT ZONE OF SPOOBY ROCK"**

lapped stadiums supporting Iron Maiden, now consolidating their gains with... a covers album. Are they flushing all that blood and glitter down the shitter? Yes and no. This isn't Imperial Triumphant pretending to know Metallica's *Motorbreath* and just doing jazzy death metal instead. Rather, Lord Of The Lost linger in their comfort zone – these are all massive tunes, easily transposed to their spoopy, keyboard-laden rock template.

Billy Idol's *Shock To The System* does as the title suggests, if only because it's not *White Wedding* or *Rebel Yell*. Frontman Chris Harms delivers the curled-lip charm of 90s Idol, filtered through his boss-level

baritone; it's sleaze, sex, soße. Niklas Kahl gets up to all sorts of rototomfoolery behind the kit, dispensing comically 80s percussion with abandon. It's this cheekiness, this unbridled glee, that transforms Keane's *Somewhere Only We Know* into more than a soundtrack for break-ups and Christmas adverts. We're not talking Spider God levels of defiling Whitney Houston with black metal, but it undoubtedly winks and nudges around those milieus of piss-taking. That, or the band have zero self-awareness.

Scrutinising the album's functionality in this fashion rends it wonky, though. Bronski Beat's gay anthem *Smalltown Boy* already got the sad goth treatment from Paradise Lost two decades ago; when LOTL's Chris parps a piercing, Devin





Townsend-ish scream, it just reminds you that Devin literally performed on Paradise Lost's version. Similar problems erect themselves on *Turbo Lover*, Judas Priest's synth-drenched, hard-rocking ode to grabbing rigid shafts and cranking them. Chris leans into that vibrato chorus, but Rob Halford he ain't; the force of Priest's original doesn't penetrate here.

And that's the rub: they've happened upon tracks initially sung by superstars. LOTL's twinkly industrial is polished, streamlined yet spacious, demanding their frontman to lead. When the stuff he's orating was first recorded by Halford, Midge Ure, and The King Of Pop/Questionable Chimp Owner Michael Jackson, he's banking for a spanking. This uncanny hollowness rings across newer tracks, too. LOTL seem pretty stoppable during Sia's *Unstoppable*, less a Porsche with no brakes and more a Fiat with shagged

suspension. Same goes for Bishop Briggs' *River*, its chorus falling prey to the trap sprung on DevilDriver's cover of *Sail* by AWOLNATION – the drop's there to showcase a powerhouse performance that never arrives. The most intriguing rendition is Cutting Crew's (*I Just Died In Your Arms*), its curiosities twofold. First, it ends like a melodeath tune. Second, Chris duets with Anica Russo – a German singer-songwriter whose Eurovision 2023 hopes were dashed by, um, this band.

*Weapons Of Mass Seduction* isn't essential, though if you love Lord Of The Lost's shtick, fill your kinky boots, tuck into the 20-plus covers – you won't be disappointed. Otherwise, it's just a marginally horny karaoke booth.

FOR FANS OF: Deathstars, Sabaton, Rammstein

ALEC CHILLINGWORTH



## ABHORIA

*Depths*

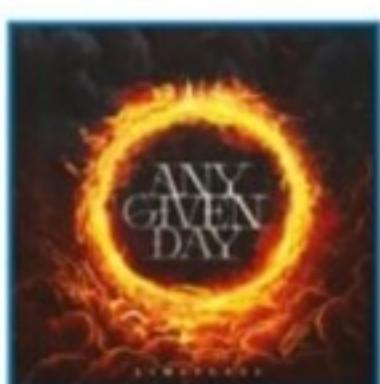
PROSTHETIC

Californian black metal evil-doers do it properly

USBM's elemental weirdness has brought many grotesque pleasures, but big, unapologetic black metal records have been relatively thin on the ground. The extent of Abhorria's ambitions aren't made clear on their second album, but there's no mistaking the sound of epic, vengeful extremity as suited to big stages as it surely is to small, sweaty ones. *Depths* has plenty of moments where the LA dwellers tinker at the edges of tradition, but its real strength is that every song sounds like it was recorded with all available feet planted on spot-lit monitors. Particularly lethal on deeper, darker cuts like *Devour* and *The Well*, Abhorria ooze confidence, command, and a genuine interest in making heads bang.

FOR FANS OF: Dream Theater, Leprous, Between The Buried And Me

ELLIOT LEAVER



## ANY GIVEN DAY

*Limitless*

ARISING EMPIRE

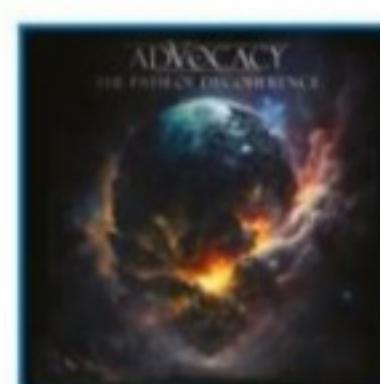
German metalcore upstarts make a move for the mainstream

Over the last few years, many modern metalcore artists have segued into the realm of US radio rock with very mixed results. This German crew are frustratingly unable to nail the formula. They start promisingly enough, with a big Poison The Well-style metallic hardcore riff opening *Get That Done*.

*Limitless* falls off a cliff soon after, though, to retreat into a series of bland, formulaic clean choruses and phoned-in emoting. *Apocalypse*'s powerful mid-section breakdown comes laced with a load of mush that makes it sound like the unwanted love child of Emmure, Bad Wolves and Skillet. It's unmemorable, opportunistic and lacking in any real personality. You'd comfortably find a better release than *Limitless* on any given day.

FOR FANS OF: Bad Wolves, Asking Alexandria, From Ashes To New

STEPHEN HILL



## ADVOCACY

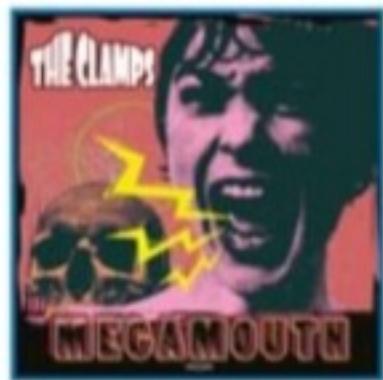
*The Path Of Decoherence*

UPRISING!

Danish prog metallers bring some muscle to their debut LP

Eight years and two EPs since their formation, Advocacy's debut album has been a long time coming. Always wanting to push themselves and the boundaries of progressive metal, the five-piece have gone heavier and more



**THE CLAMPS***Megamouth*

HEAVY PSYCH SOUNDS

*Italian hard rockers unleash a gripping third album*

When the pandemic forced them off the road, rather than spinning their wheels, The Clamps decided to write their third album instead. Funnelling all of their frustrations during that uncertain era into 10 stoner and garage rock-fuelled tracks, the Italian power trio's latest is a fast and furious thrill ride. Wearing its Zeke, Fu Manchu and early Hellacopters influences on its tattered denim sleeve, *Megamouth* is a bruising fusion of filthy guitars and soaring solos. Their ode to 70s drag racer Bill Jenkins is as badass as the man himself and brimming with breakneck riffs and leather-lunged vocals, while the catchy Bombs sees them bolster their sound with classic rock hooks. Gloriously feral and full of pure rock fury, *Megamouth* deserves to make The Clamps a new force in the underground.

**FOR FANS OF:** Zeke, Fu Manchu, The Hellacopters

EDWIN McFEE

**DOMINUM***Hey Living People*

NAPALM

*Teutonic power metallers uncover a few fresh horrors*

Playing fist-pumping power metal with a horror fixation, Dominum place themselves somewhere between Powerwolf and Lordi. But where it should

lend them a distinctive character, instead it leaves them chasing the shadows of the countless bands who have taken a similar concept further. They're just a little too tongue-in-cheek to match the Broadway theatricality of Ice Nine Kills or even the glam radio sensibilities of Lordi. Project mastermind Felix Heldt – knob-twiddler for the likes of Visions Of Atlantis and Feuerschwanz – ensures they have a few bangers in the vault to prove the concept isn't totally bust, however. *Immortalis Dominum*, *Danger Danger*, *We All Taste The Same* and *Frankenstein* all capture the glorious OTT energies and occasional AOR leanings that have made German power metal so enduringly lovable over the past 40-plus years.

**FOR FANS OF:** Edguy, Powerwolf, Lordi

RICH HOBSON

**DROWN IN SULPHUR***Dark Secrets Of The Soul*

SCARLET

*Spiritually elevating odes from the deathcore/black metal borderlands*

Taking modern deathcore and infusing it with 90s black metal, the second album from Drown In Sulphur sees the corpse-painted Milan quartet embark on a sinister, brooding journey that explores man's search for spiritual elevation – largely delivered via a furious combination of chugging riffs, blastbeats and breakdowns. The black metal elements add another dimension to the sound without ever dominating, although *Unholy Light* and the title track display their icy traits most prominently in the form of a high-end guitar

**FOR FANS OF:** Skillet, Shinedown, Seether

tone and vocalist Chris 'Christ' Lombardo utilising the shriller end of his vocal range. The melodious *Lotus* is another standout, incorporating an acoustic opening and epic, atmospheric keyboards. *Dark Secrets...* brims with potential, adding yet more richness to deathcore's current purple patch.

**FOR FANS OF:** Lorna Shore, Thy Art Is Murder, Worm Shepherd

ELLIOT LEAVER

**EMIL BULLS***Love Will Fix It*

ARISING EMPIRE

*Munich alt metallers liebe-rate themselves from their past angst*

Emil Bulls have come a long way since the nu metal angst of their early 00s releases. Their latest effort sees the Munich five-piece swapping out downtuned misery for lovelorn anthems, packed out with bright, uplifting alt metal bangers. *Sick* sparkles with soaring riffs as it worships the omnipotence of love, while the title track repackages the same message in a burst of bright, buoyant heavy metal. With all the sappiness, their attempts at anger tend to lack venom, however. Opener *Backstabbers* does broil with rage, yet, as Christoph von Freydorf later sings 'Doom, doom, doom... is coming for you,' on *Whirlwind Of Doom*, it's about as intimidating as a puppy chasing its tail, gutturals be damned. *Love Will Fix It*'s strength undeniably lies in its optimistic anthems, the culminating cry for unity on *Together* a satisfactorily poignant ending note.

**FOR FANS OF:** Skillet, Shinedown, Seether

EMILY SWINGLE

**SMALL MERCIES**

*Where EP is short for 'Epic Potential'*

**ALLUVIAL***Death Is But A Door*

NUCLEAR BLAST

Alluvial's new EP is a more perverse affair than the impressive prog death of 2021's *Sarcoma* album. *Bog Dweller*'s myriad ideas are wiped away as the unsettling *Fogbelt* and the despairing title track send the EP down a dark path.

**ADAM BRENNAN**

**ESCUELA GRIND***DDEEAATTHHMMETTAALL*

MNRK HEAVY

The fast-rising New England metallic hardcore crew's love letter to death metal reveals once again just how versatile and potent this band are. Barney Greenway's appearance on *Meat Magnet* is a face-peeling seal of approval.

**JACK TERRY**

**KILL LIST***Kill List*

CHURCH ROAD

Children Of Bodom  
retire in glory

## CHILDREN OF BODOM

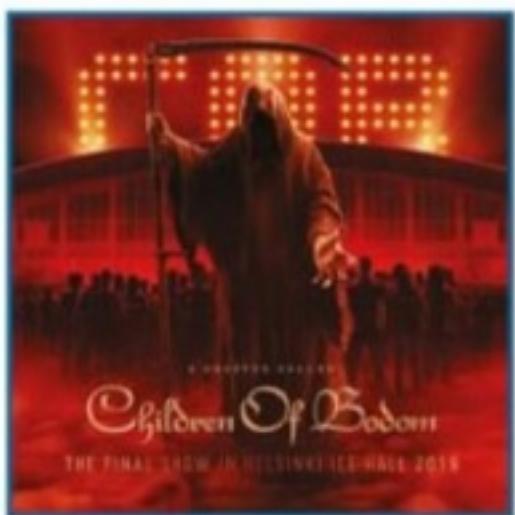
*A Chapter Called Children Of Bodom: The Final Show*  
*In Helsinki Ice Hall 2019*

SPINEFARM

*Finnish melodic metal icons bow out in untoouchable form***WHEN ALEXI LAIHO** disbanded

Children Of Bodom in 2019, then passed away just 12 months later, it left a chasm that no metal band – no matter how flamboyant, talented or charismatic – have filled since. The Wildchild was a once-in-a-lifetime rock star within extreme metal. Plus, his guitar playing's trade-offs with keyboardist Janne Wirman were so impressive and fun that few have even dared to replicate them. All of the idiosyncrasies that made both Alexi and his band great have now been immortalised on *A Chapter Called Children Of Bodom: The Final Show In Helsinki Ice Hall 2019*.

The end of Bodom was effectively foreshadowed weeks before this December 2019 gig, with Janne, drummer Jaska Raatikainen and bassist Henkka Seppälä all announcing their exits in November. That the line-up was able to sustain itself for this finale – let alone make it such a triumphant, valiant send-off – says everything about their commitment to being one of metal's most endearingly bombastic forces.



*Under Grass And Clover*, from 2019's swansong album *Hexed*, instantly flaunts Alexi and Janne's neo-classical chops. After the two exchange fanciful melodies, the more upfront *In Your Face* declares, 'I don't give a fuck, motherfucker!', symbolising the blunt-force intensity of modern classic *Hate Crew Deathroll*.

It's the concert's closing half-hour, however, that truly shows Bodom at their best. *Follow The Reaper*, *Deadnight Warrior*, *Needled 24/7*, *Hate Me!*, *Hate Crew Deathroll*, *Lake Bodom* and

*Downfall* form a series of hits from the band's golden age – and each one reinforces with bulletproof strength the all-adrenaline songwriting that made the band megastars. That nonstop excellence makes Alexi's closing farewell all the more heartbreakingly in hindsight. Even on their final night as a band, Children Of Bodom were peerless in the field of infectious, exuberant and unabashedly rowdy metal music.

**FOR FANS OF:** Arch Enemy, Necrophobic, In Flames

MATT MILLS

**EXOCRINE***Legend**SEASON OF MIST*

*French virtuosos summon another kraken from the outer realms*

Rewarded for consistently startling, envelope-pushing albums, this Bordeaux quartet have saved their best for their Season Of Mist debut. *Legend* is bigger and more experimental than even previous efforts *Maelstrom* and *The Hybrid Suns*. Whether it's *The Altar Of War*'s wall of sound or the jazz trumpet permeating the title track's dizzying labyrinth, each song possesses ferociously heavy riffs and cranium-imploding skill. Yet what sets Exocrine apart among the tech-death elite is their penchant for subversive melodic hooks that add a palpable potency to *Dragon* and epic finale *By The Light Of The Pyre*, which traverses strings, light-speed riffing, Herculean percussion and evocative twin leads.

**FOR FANS OF:** Arch Enemy, Dark Tranquillity, Insomnium

electronic beat and melodically sung verse – are little more than window dressing. Opening track *Through The Storm* could convincingly be a b-side from the latest Arch Enemy album, while *Undercurrents*' lyrics – 'The thing that I regret, is what I haven't said!' – are cringe-inducingly bland. Whatever Hiraes try next needs to be a bold diversion if they don't want to go down as also-rans.

**FOR FANS OF:** Arch Enemy, Dark Tranquillity, Insomnium

MATT MILLS

**LINNEA HJERTÉN***Nio Systrar**NORDVIS PRODUKTION*

*Ritualistic ambient super-heroics from the Swedish hinterlands*

With her debut solo album, singer and sound engineer Linnea Hjertén marks herself out as a formidable talent. A whisper compared to the goth-boshed doom she plays as a member of Shaam Larein, *Nio Systrar* is nevertheless a bold statement. The nine tracks come together like a cocoon of spun glass, Hjertén's languageless vocal performance – recorded in a closet, no less – entwining with organic ebb-and-flow drones in a way that evokes everything from battle hymns to lullabies. If there's fault to be found, it's that things occasionally err towards strangely familiar 'funeral of a beloved superhero' cinematics. It's a minor quibble, though, and one that does nothing to diminish a significant and often startling achievement.

**FOR FANS OF:** Anna von Hausswolff, Heilung, Forndom

ALEX DELLER



## THE INFERNAL SEA

**Hellfenlic**

CANDLELIGHT

Historically minded black metallers take on the Witchfinder General

Three years after their superb *Negotium Crucis* album, masked marauders The Infernal Sea return with the Olde English-inspired *Hellfenlic*. Telling the story of the infamous Witchfinder General Matthew Hopkins, the UK quartet play their brand of black'n'roll to chart his rise and fall in brutal detail. The serrated guitars of *Frozen Fen* are suitably chilling, the savagery of *Bastard Of The East* suggests just how formidable Hopkins was, while the groove-laden classic metal of *Witchfinder* and wistful folk metal of the stirring *Messenger Of God* add textures and a range not heard from them before. This is also the cleanest they've ever sounded, and while that takes away some of what made their prior albums so vital, it's still an impassioned and intriguing history lesson from the plague doctors of BM.

**FOR FANS OF:** Wode, Dawn Ray'd, 1914

JACK TERRY



## LORD DYING

**Clandestine Transcendence**

MNRK HEAVY

Portland's sludge aggressors unleash a new, progressive strain

After two full-on sludge albums, the surprising classic rock leanings of 2019's *Mysterium Tremendum* were a huge, if not quite fully mastered, leap forward for Lord Dying.

Five years later, they're clearly enjoying their genre-crossing ride with more confidence. It's most noticeable in the weird mid-album sequencing, where they switch effortlessly from *Final Push Into The Sun*'s hardcore-styled aggression to the 90s Rush-reminiscent *Dancing On The Emptiness*, boosted by Kurt Ballou's organic production. But while they excel at both throughout these 12 songs, their joy in performing eight-minute mini-epics with harmonised vocals and instant hooks suggest they're ready to leave their caveman tendencies behind for good and cross a threshold. And maybe they should.

**FOR FANS OF:** Mastodon, Kylesa, Rush

OLIVIER BADIN



## MADDER MORTEM

**Old Eyes, New Heart**

DARK ESSENCE

Norway's dark metal mavericks continue to dazzle

Despite having delivered several classic albums during their 26-year existence, Madder Mortem seem cursed to be criminally undervalued. The Norwegians' esoteric blend of huge, alt-inclined riffs and ornate, emotionally dynamic melodies is certainly esoteric, but even the strangest songs on *Old Eyes, New Heart* have insidious, slow-burning hooks. As ever, the key to the band's melodramatic power lies in Agnetha M. Kirkevaag's miraculous vocal performances, and her ability to make uproarious, art metal assaults like *Coming From The Dark* and *Master Tongue* sound both intimate and theatrical. From the noirish blues

throb of *On Guard* to the defiant, big rock roar of *Towers*, every song takes a subversive turn or two, while also packing the kind of emotional punch that necessitates major dental work. Another triumph from a fearless musical force.

**FOR FANS OF:** Oceans Of Slumber, Atrox, The Gathering

DOM LAWSON



## MASTER

**Saints Dispelled**

HAMMERHEART

Death metal's maverick OG plays to a new set of strengths

As a founding father of death metal, but always at a slight remove from the rest of the scene, Paul Speckmann has maintained an enigmatic presence in the extreme metal underground for more than 40 years. Relocating from Chicago to the Czech Republic after the millennium, the imperious frontman at last established a stable Master line-up, lasting nearly 20 years until a recent change of drummer. This injection of new blood seems to have had a revitalising effect. *Saints Dispelled* proves more colourful and animated than 2018's *Vindictive Miscreant*, egging up the rock'n'roll spirit and reconnecting with their Motörhead influences to produce a sound less caustic and brutal, but wilder and more organic. Paul's singular force of personality gets ever more eccentric on endearingly quirky melodies like *Find Your Life*, sounding less barbaric death/thrash, more 80s videogame soundtrack.

**FOR FANS OF:** Obituary, Autopsy, Massacre

CHRIS CHANTLER



## FROSTBITE ORCKINGS

**The Orcish Eclipse**

METALVERSE

AI-generated outfit fail to rewrite the fantasy metal code

**WHEN IT COMES** to the enduring image of man vs machine, *The Terminator*'s 'human skull getting crushed by a robot foot' takes some beating. But what James Cameron didn't – and perhaps couldn't – show us was the fact that when the machines rise up, they'll do it dressed as orcs. Singing jaunty second-rate Amon Amarth songs. Oh, the inhumanity.

Billed as the world's first AI-generated metal album, there will be suspicion levelled at Frostbite Orckings' *The Orcish Eclipse*. And we get it; even the name sounds more like keyword generation than the cheesy-but-effective, erm, elegance of Dragonforce or Hammerfall.

On its own merits, *The Orcish Eclipse* plays out like an oh-so-faithful take on epic sword-and-board metal championed by European bands such as Amon Amarth, Brothers Of Metal and so many other dresser-uppers. But while the likes of *Orcs Don't Cry* and *Into The Void* are whimsical and bring the bombast that fans of those same bands will likely appreciate, tracks such as *Hammers High* are so shamelessly derivative that it borders on the offensive.

Therein lies the rub: Frostbite Orckings are an entity that is destined to imitate. While the songs (generally) aren't so bad as to consign them to the bottom of the bargain bin – though daft Europop-flavoured closer *Endless Love* comes close – they also lack the inherent glee of a manic Johan Hegg beating the shit out of a gigantic sea serpent that drives home the sense that the music means something to those making it.

In a year when AI debates helped bring Hollywood to a halt, it's difficult to imagine how much of an impact the existence of a band like Frostbite Orckings – and the wider 'Metalverse' – will have on heavy metal, but right now we'll stick with people in rubber suits all the same.

**FOR FANS OF:** Amon Amarth, Warkings, Ensiferum

RICH HOBSON





**SATANIC WITCH**

4:44

VÁN

Wolvennest and E-L-R members lay out an eclectic, occult path

On their debut, this occult Belgian/Swiss supergroup explore many more moods than their rather on-the-nose moniker suggests. *Mirror Hour* launches on a lightning-speed whirlwind of blasting drums, droning chords and angel-ravaging tremolo abuse before breaking down to a cavernous, ceremonial creepy-crawl. Meanwhile, the archly titled *Kult* goes full Type O dreamy goth-doom, a crusty black metal spine poking through with hyperactive drums and backing rasps. *For None* progresses from a warm, woozy psychedelic ritual to a merciless imperial attack. The arty ambient stretches are less assured and generally skippable, but provide a degree of colour and contrast, and usually go somewhere interesting. The only downside is the interminable 13-minute *Mirage/Die Hexen*, whose goth-industrial dancefloor tendencies could at least teach Morbid Angel a thing or two.

**FOR FANS OF:** Emperor, Satyricon, Oranssi Pazuzu  
**CHRIS CHANTLER**

**SLIFT***Ilion*

SUB POP

France's wild, psych rock voyagers bulldoze past the light fantastic

If you were fond of Slift as a decent, riff-slinging stoner act, then prepare to

have the lid of your head kicked off and an electric whisk taken to its insides. Since 2020's *Ummon* they've travelled beyond the outer limits and returned bearing strange, alien gifts. The band throw everything from psych, prog and post-metal to drug-fuddled industrial into a swirling, exploratory vortex that is both thrilling and bewildering. Everything booms, howls and crashes with joyful abandon, but welded to their wild experimentation is a marshalled togetherness that ensures you stick with them every step of the way. Like Jesu on a Hawkwind tip or Loop by way of High On Fire, *Ilion* is dense, deft and dizzyingly vertiginous – a blurred, ideas-rich album that beckons 'come hither' as it steps boldly over the edge.

**FOR FANS OF:** Chrome, Teeth Of The Sea, Ashenspire  
**ALEX DELLER**

**SLOWER***Slower*

HEAVY PSYCH SOUNDS

Southern sludge metal luminaries get high on Araya

Slower formed after Fu Manchu guitarist Bob Balch slowed down *South Of Heaven*'s main riff for a student, and a blood-splattered light bulb blinked on. Reaching out to various dope-rock luminaries, he formed – you guessed it – the world's slowest Slayer cover band. Slayer's music was born of manic punk energy, Fu Manchu's of weed and boogie vans, but Slower's music is epic, crushing metal at any tempo. Show *No Mercy*'s show-stopper, *The Antichrist*, is blown out here into truly epic doom

**FOR FANS OF:** Stone Sour, Judas Priest, Seether  
**DANNII LEIVERS**

with flowy, siren's call vocals from Laura Pleasants (ex-Kylesa) and Year Of The Cobra's Amy Barrysmith. *Dead Skin Mask* is grungy, psychedelic sludge. *South Of Heaven* itself ends the album on a sexy, sinister note, transformed into a seven-minute slither of ethereal vocals and throbbing riffs. A real headspinner of an album.

**FOR FANS OF:** Slayer, Kyuss, Kylesa  
**KEN McINTYRE**

**SOUTH OF SALEM***Death Of The Party*

SPIDER PARTY

Buzz-generating alt rockers find new thrills in the familiar

South Of Salem's 2020 debut, *The Sinner Takes It All*, caused barely a ripple at the time, but, in the run-up to their second album, the band are stomping into 2024 with a buzz at their backs. The Bournemouth goth metallers just completed a sold-out UK tour, and *Death Of The Party* is packed with earworms gluier than chewing gum on the bottom of your shoe down your favourite venue. The band pull from across the heavy spectrum to create their sound, blending 80s classic metal and sleaze rock with hints of Gothenburg riffery, a good dollop of Misfits horrorpunk and bags of Stone Sour's anthemic hard rock. It all adds up to a sound that feels incredibly familiar – South Of Salem aren't exactly reinventing the wheel here, but the sheer class of the post-grunge-inspired *Static* and the radio-friendly *Left For Dead* and *Jet Black Eyes* are undeniable.

**FOR FANS OF:** Stone Sour, Judas Priest, Seether  
**DANNII LEIVERS**



Ryujin: power metal's new warrior clan

**RYUJIN***Ryujin*

NAPALM

Japan's Matt Heafy-mentored folk/power metallers enter a new era

**PREVIOUSLY KNOWN AS**

AS Gyze, the Matt Heafy-produced and mentored Ryujin are primed for global domination with their unique brand of samurai metal. Flexing traditional Japanese instruments like the shamisen, erhu and dragon flute, their eponymous fifth album brims with traditional folk elements. Meanwhile, the meteoric shredding and raspy vocals of Ryoji Shinomoto are emblematic of Ryujin's past, losing nothing in their profundity and aggression.

Ryujin's fierce six-string tactics loom large on album opener proper *Gekokujo*, unleashing Ryoji's breakneck riffs. But it's outdone in its ferocity by *Dragon*, *Fly Free*'s flute-meets-thrash tumult and *Scream Of The Dragon*, which segues from dizzying Children Of Bodom-style licks to a saccharine, clean-sung chorus.

Evoking the energy of the band's home region via the language of the indigenous Ainu people, many of the songs here nod to Japanese culture. *Raijin & Fujin*, taken from the names of the Japanese gods of thunder and wind, fuses rattling double bass drums and blistering riffs with Eastern instruments and melodies. *The Rainbow Song* then steams in with classic power metal riffing and hooks inspired by 90s anime.

It would be remiss to not take into account Heafy's massive influence on this album, whether as producer, guest vocalist (on four songs) or spiritual guide. His vocal inclusions offer a new dimension to Ryujin's sound, his recognisable choral cameo on *Raijin & Fujin* striking the perfect balance with Ryoji's formidable growls. The slick production peaks on the rich and virtuosic title track, but there are occasional moments where Heafy's studio magic falls short, sounding muddled in places and failing to give Mukai Wataru's guest cello a starring role on *Kunnecup*. Despite this, Ryujin's strategic reincarnation offers a wider stage for their unique brand of samurai metal and promises exciting things to come.



**FOR FANS OF:** Dragonforce, Moonsorrow, Trivium  
**HOLLY WRIGHT**



# SAXON

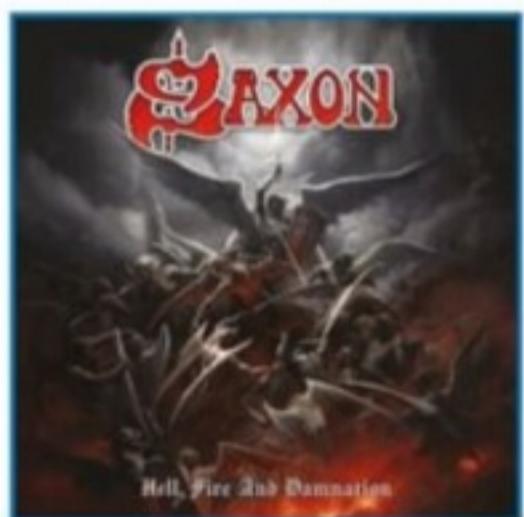
## *Hell, Fire And Damnation*

SILVER LINING MUSIC

Brit metal veterans keep their wheels of steel turning

**2022'S CARPE DIEM** saw Saxon breach the UK album chart Top 20 for the first time since 1984's *Crusader*, but it didn't mark a huge resurgence. They've had the odd dip, of course, but Saxon never went away and, over the course of an impressive 23-album back catalogue, they've retained a remarkable consistency. They have their own place in metal history, an established fanbase and an instantly recognisable sound. On album 24 they're not likely to be presenting anything jaw-droppingly different, so the main question *Hell, Fire And Damnation* has to answer is whether it succeeds on the band's own terms.

The answer is a resounding yes. Over the years, Saxon have dabbled in grandiose power metal and close-to-speed-metal bangers. The core remains the same mid-paced fists-in-the-air anthems they've been forging since their NWOBHM glory days, however, and it's a format they've now honed to perfection. The album starts with a spoken-word intro that strays perilously close to Spinal Tap's *Stonehenge*, but does get automatic



awesome points by dint of being delivered by Brian Blessed. The opening title track begins with surprising shades of Metallica's *Creeping Death* before Biff Byford issues a scream and it settles into the sort of riff-driven metallic rocker that influenced Lars Ulrich and co in the first place.

Elsewhere, they deliver musical and lyrical history lessons with the likes of *Madame Guillotine*, *1066* and *Kubla Khan And The Merchant Of Venice*. Get Saxon, Iron Maiden and Sabaton together and you

could put together a full curriculum. *Fire And Steel* appears to celebrate Sheffield in the spark-showering vein of *Princess Of The Night*, while *There's Something In Roswell* rides a chugging groove and singalong hooks that grip like an *Alien Facehugger*. It won't change the face of music or knock the world off its axis, but *Hell, Fire And Damnation* is yet another damned fine addition to Saxon's ever-expanding catalogue.

**FOR FANS OF:** Judas Priest, W.A.S.P., Iron Maiden

PAUL TRAVERS

onslaughts of howling adrenaline, they can be quickly slung aside to join the ever-growing 'modern metalcore' pile. Tech-tinged closer *Dust Of The Bereaved* does end things on an echoing, optimistic note, allowing Tenside's polished production to shine. While *Come Alive Dying* fails to stand out from the crowd, Tenside have potential.

**FOR FANS OF:** Killswitch Engage, Fit For A King, Trivium

EMILY SWINGLE



### THE RION

#### *Leviathan III*

NAPALM

Swedish symphonic metal masters round out their conceptual trilogy

Christofer Johnsson, Therion's mastermind for 35 years, concludes the epic splurge of material he amassed in lockdown. This is the last chapter in the *Leviathan* trilogy, announced as the more versatile entry after two albums of concordantly archetypal, even self-referential, pop-savvy symphonic metal 101. Actually, it's still pretty safe, trad Therion, playing to their many strengths, if more of a journey than its predecessors. Opening traces of vituperative Swedish DM co-exist with acoustic folk, stadium rock, musical theatre, emotive operatics, horror soundtrack choirs, dexterous prog-metal riffs and heroic squealing solos. This feels like the most satisfactorily rounded, expansive *Leviathan* set, with something here for everyone – if Therion fatigue hasn't set in after three similar albums in as many years.

**FOR FANS OF:** Nightwish, Amorphis, Epica

CHRIS CHANTLER



### TENSIDE

#### *Come Alive Dying*

IVORYTOWER

Teutonic modern metalcore outfit keep most of their cards in the pack

Tenside make raw, hard-hitting metalcore – they just haven't worked out how to make it exciting. *Come Alive Dying* has thrashing riffs, clamorous blastbeats and gristly gutturals, but it all congeals into a formless glob. While *Shadow To Shine*, *Impending Doom* and *Transcend* are



### UPON STONE

*Dead Mother Moon*

CENTURY MEDIA

Californian melodeath debutants pull from unusual soundscapes

Citing both At The Gates' *Slaughter Of The Soul* and powerviolence idols Nails as influences, Upon Stone present a particularly ferocious strain of melodeath on their full-length debut. *Dead Mother Moon*'s title track opens the album in a tirade of blistering and slightly blackened yet melodic riffs, and *Paradise Failed*'s intensity is hammered home by a guest turn from Shadows Fall vocalist Brian Fair. *Dusk Sang Fairest* juxtaposes a whimsical folk metal guitar line against a crushing rhythmic riff, before a bonus cover of Misfits' *Dig Up Her Bones* shows striking brevity and even more non-melodeath influence. The end result is nine songs that, bar the obligatory mid-album ambient interlude, have no wasted space. Upon Stone still have room to integrate their unconventional inspirations in a host of different ways.



**FOR FANS OF:** Children Of Bodom, At The Gates, Arch Enemy

MATT MILLS



### VIPASSI

*Lightless*

SEASON OF MIST

*Ne Obliviscaris* and Hadal Maw members get cosmic

Acknowledging the debt tech death owes to jazz and prog, Vipassi have turned their talents to ambient

instrumental adventure. The brainchild of Hadal Maw guitarist Ben Boyle and Ne Obliviscaris drummer Daniel Presland, the extremity of their day jobs persists on their debut album. Relentless blasts and riffing savagery are made zen, with swelling cosmic ambience and the entrancing warmth of Virvum bassist Arran McSporran's fretless wizardry allowing the melodic beauty that's always been part of the genre to breathe.

*Morningstar*'s bass and guitars are a twinkling, spiralling starfield amid the percussive chaos. *Neon Rain* embraces free jazz, its drums unbound, with Benjamin Baret's epic soloing providing an anchor. Firmly at the nerdier end of the metal spectrum, *Lightless* is testament to the calibre of musicianship thriving in tech death, and captivating in its cosmic complexity.



**FOR FANS OF:** Animals As Leaders, Cynic, Exivious

TOM O'BOYLE



### VITRIOL

*Suffer And Become*

CENTURY MEDIA

Premium Portland death metal that crushes all in its path

Death metal bands like to compete to be the fastest, nastiest and filthiest, but Vitriol score so highly on all counts that they tower over most of their peers. Their 2019 debut, *To Bathe From The Throat Of Cowardice*, was defined by its psychotic intensity and the impenetrable darkness that enveloped every blast-driven riff. *Suffer And Become* simply ups the ante, as Vitriol become an even more overwhelming, oppressive and violent force. Impressively, they

have also remembered to add depth and the occasional nuance to the claustrophobic deluge. The opening *Shame And Its Afterbirth* is nigh-on seven minutes of bewildering controlled chaos with wild guitar solos that border on the ecstatic. *Flood Of Predation* is a haunted whirlpool of acrid blastbeats and hot bile. Vitriol are terrifyingly good.



**FOR FANS OF:** Hate Eternal, Hideous Divinity, Throne

DOM LAWSON



### YERSIN

*The Scythe Is Remorseless*

SELF-RELEASED

Sunderland grindcore trio unleash an effective second assault

Yersin's second album is a powerful mix of savage grindcore and sludgy guitar tones, with a smattering of unexpected creative ideas thrown in for good measure. The lullaby-esque piano that opens *Triumphant* provides a brief calm before the storm, with the band displaying an understanding of dynamism often lacking in their peers. While grindcore's full-throttle acceleration is present throughout, the trio allow room for slower, groovier tempos that sustain the

album's momentum over 25 minutes without familiarity dampening the impact. At just seven songs, *The Scythe...* is a reversal of the 'more songs is more' ethos that allows each to stand up on their own merits. Yersin aren't in the same league as the very best the genre has to offer just yet, but they display enough creative ideas and individuality to rise up the ranks.



**FOR FANS OF:** Napalm Death, Nails, Wormrot

REMFRY DEDMAN



Vemod have made a bid for black metal's upper echelons

### VEMOD

*The Deepening*

PROPHETIC PRODUCTIONS

Norway's atmospheric black metallers make a transformative leap

EMERGING FROM NAMSOS, a cradle of Norway's rich metal heritage, Vemod return with their long-awaited second outing. Their 2012 debut, *Venter På Stormene*, was a decent, if slightly generic, offering, but *The Deepening* elevates the trio's sonic alchemy to new stirring new heights.

Vemod's ability to weave together the dimensions of time and space is evident here. It's as if they have absorbed the ethereal essence and rugged beauty of Norwegian fjords and mountains and transformed it into sound, embodied by teleportational soundscapes like *Fra Drømmenes Bok I*. This connection to nature and their Nidrosian black metal roots remains strong, yet the post-punk gothic undertones of *Inn I Lysande Natt* establish the lengths to which Vemod have committed to expanding their sonic palette. Within these six tracks, waves of profound melancholia and probing introspection are interwoven with a wider array of emotional and vivid sonic imagery. It's a shift that echoes the trajectory of French contemporaries Alcest, yet Vemod retain a distinct, Norwegian identity.

The 16-minute title track closes the album with a devastating emotional crescendo. Here the band experiment with myriad styles and longer, more complex compositions, revealing intricate layers and evolving themes that affirm the album's message of transformation and growth. It's a compelling demonstration of the band's refusal to be pigeonholed.

*The Deepening* is more than a step forward from its predecessor; it's a giant leap. Vemod have crafted an experience that is not only musically profound but philosophically stirring. It represents a critical moment, capturing the band transcending their debut and announcing them as pioneers of a sound that defies conventional boundaries. An ideal companion for some much-needed solitude on a cold winter night.



**FOR FANS OF:** Harakiri For The Sky, Violet Cold, Ellende

JOE DALY

